

*Foreword*  
*Note to Self*

Text and image; image and text. Paintings that use commercial techniques to trick and seduce; stories that captivate by their formulaic construction. The connection between systematic painting and genre fiction is in the use of crafted effect – whether for dramatic tension or illusory depth – in a way that is, at the very least, plausible. This connection isn't a metaphor, merely a parallel. Lucy McKenzie and Alan Michael have familiarised themselves with the methodologies of illusionistic painting, *trompe l'oeil* and photorealism respectively. They step in and out of these processes, repeatedly returning to gaze at the surfaces they have invoked, sometimes presented in direct contrast.<sup>1</sup> Their paintings are conventional, formal and time-consuming; qualities used to reinforce their intentions in a way that could not be achieved by simply presenting an object or photograph rather than its hand-painted stand-in.

Crime fiction has a prescribed structure: the consumer of crime paperbacks demands both novelty and the reassurance of being in familiar territory. But its typology is versatile and open to mutation, so that new crime fiction categories are created when its parameters are transgressed. Its rules can be studied, learned and then inhabited without disturbing its populist surface. Detective fiction can therefore be instrumentalised as a paradigm of procedure. This procedure is often constructed so well as to make it dissolve in the pleasure of experience, and, like many orthodoxies, it is routinely taken for granted. Why is poison always considered a 'woman's weapon'? Why does the market demand that the people on the covers of books should have so little in common with the characters they are meant to embody?

But what about a crime paperback as a piece of site-specific work, where the location of the action and the place in which it is read are one and the same? *Unlawful Assembly* is a collection of interrelated short stories that was intended as a cheap holiday read to titillate and entertain visitors to the Mediterranean island of Stromboli. The target readership were the participants in and visitors to an event entitled *Evil Under the Sun*,

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<sup>1</sup> McKenzie and Michael have shown together on several occasions since their meeting in 1995 at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in Dundee. In 2009, for the exhibition *The Associates* in Dundee, Michael's photorealist paintings were hung inside a *trompe l'oeil* room décor by McKenzie, their different manipulation of illusionistic surface shown one inside the other.

which took place there in the summer of 2013.<sup>2</sup> McKenzie and Michael's intention for the event was to produce an *adequate object* – a book of neat, functioning narratives that could seamlessly integrate into the scenery and props of a civilised society at leisure. The extended tale by McKenzie, 'Shooting Diary', is a self-contained account of a murder on the volcano. The trio of short stories by Alan Michael – 'The Nagging Flower', 'Magic Realism' and 'Not Going to Lie' – are interwoven by a repetition of themes, phrases and characters; Stromboli itself appears alternately in distant reports or as the setting for events. The four stories are united not only by the book's sequential order, but by their shared themes of narcissism, ineffectuality and paranoia. Stromboli's identity is irrevocably bound to the film of the same name made by Roberto Rossellini in 1950. *Unlawful Assembly* uses the island as the backdrop for its own cinematic viewpoint: the watching and making of films is acted out by their protagonists from a variety of obscure angles. The explicit link between film, literature and crime was identified by Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* writers and their appropriation of detective fiction subverted the genre's original function, bringing it into the lexicon of the literary avant-garde.

As with the *nouveau roman*, McKenzie and Michael's handling of the detective form is deliberately superficial. By styling their atmospheres to those evoked by crime fiction, they turn *Unlawful Assembly* into an intermediary between fiction and art. As a collaboration between two painters, the project was explicitly approached as a means of generating a more complex form of visual content than could be achieved merely by illustrating their texts: collaboration itself was the goal, with a format chosen to follow suit. Both artists use appropriation, at times treating their source material with the same casualness as crime fiction's dealings with death, where it is trivialized it into a clue-generated narrative device. Both painters also have an often ambiguous relationship with their chosen subjects, acknowledging that appropriation can be a form of colonisation. In their hands it is a perverse ally.

Following on from the publication of *Unlawful Assembly*, and reducing their collaborative experience to a form of 'found material', the artists went on to create a series of paintings and photographs for the exhibition *Note To Self* at The Artist's Institute in New York.<sup>3</sup> Alan Michael's painting *Gases Rising* is based on photography of generic vinyl

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<sup>2</sup> Volcano Extravaganza is an annual informal residency and festival on the island of Stromboli hosted by The Fiorucci Art Trust since 2010. Its 2013 programme, *Evil Under the Sun*, was curated by Lucy McKenzie and the Trust's director Milovan Farronato. *Unlawful Assembly* was published by the Trust in collaboration with the artist's imprint Scelus Libri.

<sup>3</sup> *Note To Self*, The Artist's Institute, New York, September 20th – October 20th 2013.

exhibition signage, here representing a bespoke sign re-using typography designed by HIT, Berlin, for the original cover design of *Unlawful Assembly*. The style of the painting alludes to the focal-depth and reflection fetishes of classical photorealist painters – a mindless value system according to the visual representation of labour, and a potentially endless and shallow surface fabric that provides a space-filling analogue to the extremely conservative procedural formalism of crime fiction. Lucy McKenzie's *Quodlibet XXVII (Unlawful Assembly I)* is a traditional *trompe l'oeil* pin-board arrangement. Historically, these paintings were used for the discreet expression of political or religious dissent. McKenzie's, however, are more like the ubiquitous research mind-maps of DVD boxset *policier* dramas, indispensable to both detective and sociopath alike. It shows ephemera relating to the writing of *Shooting Diary* such as an email from one of her fictional protagonists to Alan Michael, and the on-line payment form for a private Crime Fiction Academy in New York. One of the objects it contains is the 1975 Penguin edition of *The Mandelbaum Gate* by the Scottish author Muriel Spark.

Muriel Spark wrote about surveillance, blackmail and betrayal within isolated groups such as nuns and expatriates. Her 1970 novel *The Driver's Seat* is celebrated as a 'reverse detective novel'.<sup>4</sup> In it the central character Lise is simultaneously detective, murderer and victim. In the 1970s, Penguin republished Muriel Spark's back catalogue with a set of contemporary covers featuring specially commissioned photographs by 'Van Pariser'. They are in the then-fashionable style of David Hamilton, but as if his girl-children had grown up into vacant adult women. The soft-focus effect implies romance first and foremost, but also a kind of absentmindedness; the opposite of the head-screwed-on self-sufficiency and dispassionate sexuality that normally typify Spark's protagonists and heroines. What is she dreaming about? As with a great many mass-market book jackets, this series gives the impression of being done on a low-budget, deadline-led production line, with only a cursory knowledge of the novel's setting and plot being deemed necessary to inform the commercial artist's work. McKenzie and Michael collaborated with the conceptual artist Josephine Pryde to produce a special portrait to accompany the reproduction of their stories in this volume. This cover image explicitly embodies the disconnection between the book's characters and their visual representation. By this means they insert their book into that series of Spark reprints, and the world of the genderised paperback populated by vague, Vaseline-lens maidens.

It was in Italy where Patricia Highsmith's anti-hero Tom Ripley learned the rudiments of impersonation and killing, and it is a photograph, both enigmatic and prosaic, taken by

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Vara, 'The Victim and Her Plots: the function of the overpowering victim in Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat*', in David Herman (ed.), *Muriel Spark: twenty-first-century perspectives* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

Spark in Florence in 1988, that serves as the blueprint for McKenzie's photographic series *Stromboli*. The series is a contemporary update of Spark's middle-class literary milieu, but the scene is the same; the anonymous figures are the readership of *Unlawful Assembly*. Spark and Highsmith shared a cat, Spider, and were among several writers the artists discussed while holidaying on Stromboli in 2012. McKenzie explains:

*Alan and I have similar tastes when it comes to literature; we like precision, dreamy hysteria and exploitation. Over time the recommendation and discussion of books created a sublimated intimacy between us. On Stromboli with a group of friends last summer I got to sketch his portrait, another form of redirected affection. On the sunny terrace he was reading accounts of secret Zionist cells in Palestine; I read about Stephen Ward's part in the Profumo Affair of 1963. Ward used drawing to weasel his way into the lives of useful people, which made me reflect on my own motivations for drawing from life. It seemed like a good fiction. In 'Shooting Diary' the gang are attempting to make an 'artsploitation' film, while one of their group, a Ripleyesque sociopath, uses flattering portraiture as a tool for social climbing. My drawings of Alan were the precursors to his.*

Like the ratio in fast food of fat, salt and sugar to protein, their stories confront pathology in a consumable (and cynical) package of calibrated sex, violence and humour. Alan Michael's stories are embedded within one another with dreamy circularity. They play with concealment and observation, and the mind-set of a cursory, received knowledge of crime fiction, as picked up from TV films and themed fashion spreads. In 'The Nagging Flower' we descend into a description of a graphic novel while still within a film showcasing a loosely-styled incarnation of a famous literary detective (as well as several different films in which the character has starred before, styled just as badly). It's been said that the structure of a police investigation replicates the technique of the modern novel: 'there are clues to an event, say a murder, and someone comes along and puts the pieces together in order that truth may be revealed'<sup>5</sup> Michael makes his own use of this; the unstable, barely rendered characters in his three stories exist in an atmosphere of conspiracy and reference to real events and actual crimes, but here investigation remains unfulfilled, 'non-resolved'. The process being described is the activity of the appearance itself, the image of *Crime Fiction*. Codes are inoperable labels.

McKenzie's rigorously plotted and structured longer story, processes her themes through an absorption and deployment of these codes situated at the boundary between simulation and the self-consciously skilled industry of genre writers. The structure

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<sup>5</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet Interview, *The Art of Fiction*, Paris Review, No. 99, Spring 1986.

becomes invisible as the story moves ahead and the fates of her characters loom larger than the knowledge that this is a component of a visual art practice. Her protagonists express the same casually misogynistic opinions as those found in the novels of Agatha Christie and PD James. Using dialogue gleaned from websites such as *overheardinnewyork*, their exchanges are disconcertingly conventional, as if the artist is trying to inhabit attitudes as far away from her own as possible. She challenges the reader to separate what she says from what she thinks.

In the scene she sets, her characters experience art as a lifestyle choice in which sexuality is a simplified, mundane decor. Fundamentally, 'Shooting Diary' attempts to explore the failure and disjunction that occurs when sexuality, skilfully evoked through prose, is translated to a concrete visual form like cinema. Those who deal in the erotic succeed only when the rules of pornography (rules just like crime fiction's, both rigid and permeable) are recognized. The experiments of the *nouveau roman* writers are a case in point.

Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* is the longest running play of all time. People who don't visit the theatre very often might find its on-stage illusion of snowstorms raging beyond country house windows more convincing than its dialogue, acting and plot. The overheating in the theatre may even send them to sleep. Stromboli is such a stage. It is an island where the police work out, wear tight shirts and drive around in golf-carts. People there observe a code of dressed-down, off-duty money with a supporting crew of seasonal service workers. The total elimination of the chaos back on the mainland provides the essential conditions for the colonisations of genre and format in the following texts.